



Mary (Idemoto) Iwami



Mary Iwami at her home in Cerritos

“It was a struggle because once we got to the point where we could live in that little house that they built, everything was happy. And then this war happens, and they’re taken from their comfort.”

Mary (Idemoto) Iwami remembers the day her parents’ life changed permanently and seemingly in an instant, disrupting their life as farmers in the agricultural sprawl of Salinas, California. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, FBI agents came to their home to warn Mary’s father to get rid of anything that could link them back to Japan or reveal their sympathies to their birth country. Like many first generation Issei, the decision to keep Japanese mementos or discard them was a simple one — proving faithfulness to their adopted American homeland took precedence.

Mary’s experience of being uprooted and living in two camps is told through the eyes of an eight-year-old child who remembers with nostalgic detail the home, one built from the ground up by her father, they were forced to leave behind. As she bore witness to watching her parents’ modest life fall apart, Mary today remains in awe of her father’s stoic, silent strength to carry on. “He rarely showed any frustration. I never heard him yell but a certain look and a few words told us what he felt. I truly admired him.”

What was your childhood like, and can you talk about some of your most vivid memories of growing up in Salinas?

My father, Kenji Idemoto and his brother Mitsuru Idemoto came to America in 1918 when they were 18 and 16 years



old, respectively, from Hiroshima, Japan. It must have been a difficult decision to make leaving security and family at such a young age and to come where language, customs, and a way of life are so different. They settled in Long Beach, California, and moved to various locations where work was available. After many years, he married my mother, Fujiye Matsuda, in January 1934 by arrangement of the two families in Japan, and did not see each other until she came here from Japan. My father was 34, 14 years older than mother who was days short of being 20 years old. I don't recall details of our life except that my father worked hard and mom was a homemaker. We lived in Salinas, California. My father was a nice, quiet, reserved man of few words who I always admired and respected. My mother was outgoing and more social.

I was born December 20th, 1934, and have three brothers: Akio born October 1936, Kunio born in February 1938, and Tom (Yoshitake) born in July 1941. He's the only one who has an English name because his Japanese name was too hard to say. We had a dog named Jimmy who was collared to a long chain to the outdoor laundry line and had the freedom to run the length of it. Occasionally he was allowed to be free but enjoyed chasing the chickens too much.

What do you recall about the community and neighborhood that you grew up in?

I remember we had family friends who lived very close by. We attended the Buddhist church in town on Sundays and life felt secure. I have a panorama photo of about 170 church members standing outside of the Salinas church bell tower taken in 1934 before I was born. For a small town, that is a large number in



membership. I remember during my first grade, my teacher Mrs. Clark came to my home and asked permission from my parents so I could go on a trip with her to another school in King City (which was not too far away) to draw and paint a mural. There were other children involved, too. Although I don't remember what I drew, I recall coming home after dark and my parents were very grateful that Mrs. Clark took such kind care of me. I actually remember her carrying me out of the car. And when she knocked on the door, Mom and Dad were there waiting and they knew how kind she was because I was in her arms — I was asleep. I can still recall Mrs. Clark's pretty face and her smile.

As a young child, I was grateful that we had a nice family and supporting close friends. We lived in a very old farm house but in time we moved into a new home. One of the most impressive things in the house was a new, maroon velvet sofa. That really was something I thought about for many years. It was almost magenta colored. We children were not allowed to sit on it until we had bathed. I did not know at the time that the fathers had decided each of the families needed new residences. The men folks had built five new homes prior to 1938. So I have pictures of the old home and the new home — and we had indoor plumbing, a modern toilet, and a small living room, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. I remember how proud I was of that beautiful sofa with a palm plant next to it and I always recall that and used to think, "Well, we did alright," when my folks were really having a hard time. It was a nice reference to make.

Did they own their land or did they lease it?

No, my father worked for a big farmer called Yuki Farmers. And I think these other families also worked in that kind of capacity, it was a large family. And to this day I think their generation has continued.

My father built a Japanese outdoor bathhouse called the ofuro, for soaking after cleansing our bodies. Wood burning fire beneath the tub turned it into a very hot rectangular tub of water. Children were not allowed in the bathhouse unless Father or Mother was there. However, the worst possible had happened. My father used to go to the bathhouse, get some water, add

some water to it, and wash his face and hands before dinner. Daily, my father washed up for dinner by filling a pan of hot water and added cold water to soap and wash his face and hands. Well this one instance, my brother, Kunio, who was about three years old followed after my father had left the bathhouse. I happened to be in the yard when Kunio came out screaming and crying, pulling his sweater off his arm, and off came melted skin with it. I will never forget that scene. I don't know what degrees of burns but I think it was fourth degree burns and required a hospital stay. It took a while for it to recover with bandages, and we had to guard against infection. It was about the time when war became imminent. Surgery on Kunio's fingers was required but that had to wait. So the arm became scarred of course, but all of the curving of the hand remained the way it was all through Poston.

So this happened in about 1941, right before the war?



Mary's father, Kenji Idemoto

I don't know what time of the year, but it was between '41 and '42 because he was in the hospital for a good month and we missed him. But his arms were bent and curled because both arms hit the water, and he was able to back out. And some of the water got on his legs. But he was only three years old, so he had tiny limbs. I think about that and I talked to him the other day and I asked him, "What do you remember about that?" And he said, "Well it's a good thing we went to Tule Lake because the doctor there was a very special plastic surgeon." So that helped. He was a Japanese

doctor, too.

Your parents must have been so worried about how they would get him help.

Oh yeah, right. I think before we were leaving my father may have asked about that but I don't know. I don't think there was anything they could do.

They said we had to go.

It wasn't long afterwards that we had a visit from government officials directing us to bury any relics or pictures that related to the emperor or empress of Japan, and giving my father directives to move to an assembly center for all Japanese people due to the outbreak of war. Following these directives, he began cutting a picture of me out of a photograph of rows of dolls that were in the background which made up the royal court, with the emperor and empress at the very top. So he cut me out, then had to discard the pictures of the royal court. I saw him dig a hole in the ground and bury many things which I wanted, but now unable to keep. That was so sad. So I have the picture when I was a year old, with no background.

When Pearl Harbor happened, do you remember that day?

What happened to me, I don't recall that day at all. I think it was because we were on a farm, we didn't even know it was being bombed, probably. But my father knew about it because the menfolk talked. But we didn't talk about it and to me, it didn't register anything. I didn't know what war was or anything.

What do you recall about the government officials who came to talk to your father?

I remember they had badges and they just looked different. I remember just peeking, but I didn't know what it was about. And all I knew is Papa said we have to do this and I knew that it was the war.

When were you finally forced to move from your home?

It was in April 1942, and we were bused to the Salinas Rodeo grounds which was



converted to an assembly center. I remember following close to my parents at all times. I have never seen so many people with faces of apprehension. Nobody was smiling, it was just confusion, and I remember that. I don't have any visuals of our facility — I think I blocked it out of my memory. But I know that some people had to sleep on mattresses made out of straw. And it had a very foul smell because it was the Rodeo grounds. So I think it was something I did not want to remember.

Kenji Idemoto with his children, pre-war. From left to right: Mary, Tom (Yoshitake), Kunio and Akio.

On July 4th, we were on a train with covered windows for a long ride to Arizona. I remember among all the Japanese, there were American soldiers riding along with us. But I think they were being transferred to another location, not as military watchmen of us as they were young and friendly. I remember that because we had suitcases that were under the seat, and our Big Ben alarm clock went off and it made really a loud noise and people were smirking and kind of laughing, but you know, Japanese are very reserved. But those fellows were saying, "Hey, time to wake up," or something like that, trying to converse with me. They were facing us and we were facing them, that's how I remember it.

I've never heard of outside soldiers sharing a train with the Japanese Americans.

They were very young, and very friendly. When we arrived in Poston, they were having the worst dust storm in decades. It was hot and miserable and you could not see, and the blowing sand hurt my face. I remember my mother and I visited the bathroom and she had fainted. Nothing like that had ever happened before so I thought she had died. That was traumatic, other women went to her aide and other women tried to console me. I remember crying so hard. My youngest brother was just a year old and she was still nursing him and I'm sure she was exhausted. That experience remains firm in my memory.

Poston was a large camp and we lived in barracks that housed four families. Each family had one room which was divided into sleeping areas by hanging

a sheet. The other side was for the living area with a table and chairs. But for a family of six, it was very small. Somehow we had beds and mattresses for sleeping. I don't know if the government provided them or not. I imagine they did. Our parents found wood to make small furniture like cabinets to house our books and supplies. Poston did not have restrictive fencing surrounding the camp perimeter. People were allowed to wander to the Colorado River to fish or to look for driftwood and ironwood to make carvings. With patience and time, my father made a beautiful game board called *go* out of ironwood.

Almost every family had a cooler outside their window because of the intense heat. We learned to not walk barefooted to avoid stepping on scorpions, gila monsters or rattlesnakes. As a seven year old, I had fun as a brownie scout. One of our favorite pastimes was playing with marbles, digging up ant holes to make a target. The ants were red and larger and if bitten, it could hurt. We saw outdoor movies on certain nights and enjoyed going to the store to purchase small playthings with our parents. I think they called them canteens. They bought our clothes there and sometimes ordered them through mail order catalogs, also. We attended school daily and life was fine. I remember there was a family of four fellows who were young adults or in late teens as one of them used to tease me and chase me around a lot. That was probably the only negative about Poston. It was just teasing but I didn't like that, it was uncomfortable.

But being there not quite a year, discussions arose within our relatives about one's loyalty to the U.S. government or to Japan. Each adult had to decide where his or her allegiance stood. The U.S. government had a form that required answers. My aunt and one uncle were Japan loyalists and my mother bordered on it too, but not my father. However, there was consideration of my brother's burned arm that required additional surgery and it was said that Tule Lake camp had a larger hospital and would be able to conduct this involved surgery for my brother's fingers. My aunt and uncle left for Japan and we were transferred to Tule Lake, California very close to the Oregon border.

Mom, she signed no/no so she had to regain her citizenship again. And my

father, I don't know about him. I just wonder if someone could just tag along and say "yes." I don't know that, isn't that awful? I don't know that. But he wasn't wanting to, he said "That's not the place to go. That's a small country." I remember seeing how everybody was overwhelmingly one-sided and Pop was quietly saying that's just not the place to go. But that was all I remember. And that was before we went into Tule.

Your father was working so hard to create this life in the United States and he just wanted to build a foundation.

Right and to create a family and happiness here. And it was a struggle because once he got to that point where we could live in that little house that they built, everything was happy. He was secure with his job, they liked him and he used to do tractor work and things like that, and then this war happens, and they're taken from their comfort. And I often wonder how they managed to pay for the goods. I wonder if they sent cash to Spiegel's. He used to order from Chicago Spiegel's in Tule Lake because we were all growing, and outgrowing our shoes. And I wondered how he paid for it, that was one of the questions I always wondered. So he had to be on his toes all the time. I remember he bought us galoshes, and I remember getting them and I says, "Did you get this for us?" And he says, "We ordered it and the size is big so just stuff them with newspaper at the top." We used to stuff them and it was a little bigger so we could wear it for a couple of years. So I think about all those things he had to decide.



So there were many contrasts between the two camps. The weather, the people, military prevalence, a quiet concern for ourselves, a sense of insecurity, and tall fencing surrounded the camp with military men with guns in watchtowers located everywhere. For me, it was this aggressive tight band of men running each morning shouting "wasshoi wasshoi," a form of exercise that I found scary and I use to run away when they were approaching. They wore white bands tied on their

head and many bare chested without shirt tops. People didn't have the freedom to go distant and were unable to leave without written permission. Tule Lake was the largest camp and security was tight.

In the winter it snowed a lot. Like Poston, there were barracks lined on two sides with the bathrooms and showers building in the middle, along with an ironing and laundry building. That was called a block so we lived in Block 20. I remember we had a chamber pot because walking in the snow at night to visit the bathroom was difficult and required a parent. But as children do, their play takes them to hidden places and the boys found the place where potatoes were kept in bulk. It was below the ironing room floor. It made for a perfect place to keep potatoes cool. In the summer we would sneak a few potatoes and throw them in a fire we made in a sunken pit to cook. Trick was to get them out without burning our hands. But they were so good to eat with a spoon after peeling off the scorched skin. We attended Japanese school in the afternoon after our morning English school. The Japanese school was very strict and the teacher readily used the ruler to keep the class in order and quiet. Both of my parents worked to earn \$16 a month — mother worked in the kitchen and I don't remember what my father did but I think he worked with storage because he used to carry boxes back and forth.

But because they were not around, I didn't eat well and developed nephritis, a kidney problem that required me to remain bedridden for nine months in the hospital. I missed the fun but enjoyed drawing and sketching when the thoughtful nurses brought me tablets. My brother had his surgery, too. I didn't know the details except that his fingers and hands work fine but his arms are bent slightly and scarred to this day.

What details do you remember from camp when the war ended?

When the war ended and Japan surrendered, Tule Lake was filled with sounds of wailing older folks, especially women sitting on the ground, crying and hitting the dirt. I can recall that sadness and felt very sorry for

them. Because there were so many pro-Japanese people, I just could not think, because they're older, how would they get along? In time the fathers were permitted to leave camp to look for jobs. I think they had information that helped them seek their choices. But I'm not sure as I've never talked about it with my father. We missed him but when he returned, he brought a wonderful surprise: a bag filled with candies.

We didn't leave Tule Lake until 1946, reaching our new home in Coyote, California by train. Coyote is about 12 miles south of San Jose. Father's work was to walk the train tracks, fix any problems with the wood ties and replace or securing spiked bolts to the track. So it's not easy, but tiring as walking the track on uneven surfaces kept you aware not to fall. I don't recall him ever complaining, nor my mother, who worked whatever farm work she could find. I remember that we needed a car and after a while, our first car was a pale blue 1936 Plymouth and we were so proud.

We were fine in the rural community but whenever we were in San Jose to shop for clothes, we were exposed to racial slurs and once while standing together a street corner, we were spit upon by passing cars and told to go back to Japan. That was my first feeling of alienation that stayed with me for days.

How difficult was it for your parents to get back on their feet and settle back into the routine of the family?

Those years created such hardships for my parents, especially my father who had continuous concerns for the family wherever we went. Keeping us warmly clothed and supplied with necessities during the war years depleted his savings. His concentration was then to earn and save money for the future. With four children to raise, his responsibility was heavy. He rarely showed any frustration. I never heard him yell but a certain look and a few words told us what he felt. I truly admired him and was grateful that he had such strength. My mother was quite vocal. When reimbursements could be sought for losses sustained when we were relocated to the camps, Mom was very critical that Dad did not request or sign up for financial compensations.



Kenji Idemoto with his children, post-war. From left to right: Kunio, Mary, Tom, and Akio.

After about a year in Coyote, we moved to Watsonville to begin sharecropping in strawberry farming. Eventually we were able to buy a home close to the Buddhist church in town. Sometime later he rented land and became an independent farmer contracting Mexican laborers to help. I regret and feel badly that he worked so hard all his life and was never able to visit Japan, which I think was on his bucket list. He died rather young of cancer at age 65. My mother lived a full and good life, passing away at age 102 in 2018.

My mother was able to sell the farm soon after my father passed away and didn't really want to live in the home by herself and wanted to move to one of the apartments behind the church where some of her friends lived, so

that's what she did. So she was very close to the church, very active, used her sushi recipe because she insisted on it. She was very independent, resourceful. Mom could live on her own very well. In time though when she became 94, 95, we saw there was memory lapsing.

So after that, I took her home and packed her things. And she used to come and stay with us for a couple of months every year but there's nothing like home. She had lived behind the church for 45 years and that's her home. That's her place where she would live all her life and she used to tell me that. And I'd tell her, "This is your new home." And when I finally had to tell her that her apartment's been rented out, then there was a big change. She used to eat well and she enjoyed everything but when she knew she could not go back, she started losing a little weight and became depressed. She says, "I gotta go home." And then because of her dementia it was beginning to increase and she started having delusions. But she was healthy, there was nothing really wrong with her.

Did she always remember who you were?

Yes, she knew.

Did you ever get a chance to ask her about her experience in camp?

No, we just hit and miss about a topic. And it was always about our family. It wasn't about the situation and how they felt because I knew. When we were in Tule Lake, I knew that it was not happy like Poston. There was a lot of laughter and so on but in Tule Lake, it was a little bit more withdrawn. There was a lot of things happening. I was ill, my brother had surgery and they were working and there was all of this — not rumors but scary thinking that was coming from the southern part of our camp. I was closer to the northeast side. So Castle Rock was not that far and we'd all walk to the hospital because it was right there below it.

But I wish I talked to my father because I would've gotten some opinions and what he thought and what he anticipated what his life would be. Did you ever think that you would like to go back to Japan? We didn't talk about that, I wish we had. I just really feel for my dad. He took a lot of — Mom

used to be very vocal. One time it made me cry because he said, “Well when you have arranged marriages you don’t get to pick your mate.” It’s not the kind of thing he would’ve said at all unless we were talking so much. I got married when I was 23, and I was coming down to LA.

Do you feel that they had a good marriage?

Yeah. You know, they tolerated each other. I know Mom respected him but she always felt that he should’ve been a little more stronger. That’s because he was quiet, he was very intelligent.

And how did you meet your husband?

I met him in LA. I was vacationing with a friend and we happened to go to my aunt’s place. and he was a distant relative of hers and he was washing his car there, so that’s how I met him. That was it. And then he wrote me because he was going to graduate school at UCLA then. We talked about jazz, I used to like going to the jazz festival in Monterey. So we went to Blackhawk’s — that was a jazz place in San Francisco. And Redd Foxx was there, and he was just throwing out cracks and jokes that I didn’t get. And everybody’s laughing away. And he says, “You’re not getting it, huh?” And I said no. And he says, “That’s okay, that’s good.” Because it was all off-color. I was young. 21, or something like that. And then my mom and dad, well they were thinking oh gee, they’re going to San Francisco. So they stayed up, and I know we came back much later than — like 12:30, 1:00 or something like that.

But my husband and I got along, we were good. He was a good man. I lost him 25 years ago.

ORIGINALLY POSTED ON DECEMBER 25, 2020